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ABSTRACT

This digest discusses children with reading difficulties and how these children can be helped to read and learn more effectively. The digest offers a definition and discussion of dyslexia, examines instructional conditions that help the reading comprehension of children labeled as learning disabled, offers suggestions for choosing helpful reading materials, and stresses the importance of a positive attitude on the part of the child. (RS)

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Helping Children Overcome Reading Difficulties

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by Carl B. Smith and Roger Sensenbaugh

Almost everyone knows a story about the nice little youngster (or sometimes, a grownup) who works hard but can't seem to learn to read and to write. The child's mother works with him or her at home, reading to the child and reading with the child. The child has a tutor at school. The youngster tries with all his/her might, even to the point of tears, but the symbols and the words won't stick. Though apparently learned today at great pain, tomorrow they will be gone. The question is: what do we know about problem readers that will help us guide them? This digest will discuss children with reading difficulties and how these children can be helped to read and learn more effectively.

Dyslexia

Most children begin reading and writing by the first, second, or third grade. By the time they are adults, most can't recall or can't remember what it was like not to be able to read and write, or how difficult it was to figure out how to translate patterns on a page into words, thoughts, and ideas. These same adults usually cannot understand why some children have not yet begun to read and write by the third grade. They have even more difficulty understanding how adults can function in our society with only the most rudimentary literacy skills.

Dyslexia is perhaps the learning disability that is most widely known, primarily because of Barbara Bush's efforts to make adults aware of the problem of children with this and other learning disabilities. Stories about children (and adults) trying to overcome their learning disabilities appear in the mass media with some regularity. Despite the relative familiarity of the word "dyslexia," there is no clear-cut, widely accepted definition for dyslexia. In the broadest sense, dyslexia refers to the overwhelming difficulty in learning to read and write by normally intelligent children exposed to suitable educational opportunities in school and at home. These often very verbal children's reading levels fall far below what would have been predicted for their quick and alert intelligence (Bryant and Bradley, 1985).

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Just as educators and researchers cannot agree on a specific and precise definition of dyslexia, they do not agree on the cause or causes. Recent research (Vellutino, 1987) has challenged many commonly held beliefs about dyslexia: dyslexia results in reversal of letters; dyslexics show uncertain hand preference; children whose first language is alphabetic rather than ideographic are more likely to have dyslexia; and dyslexia is correctable by developing strategies to strengthen the child's visual-spatial system. Instead, *dyslexia appears to be a complex linguistic deficiency marked by the inability to represent and access the sound of a word in order to help remember the word and the inability to break words into component sounds.*

It does appear that there might be a hereditary factor in dyslexia. In one study of 82 average children with reading problems, the children were divided into two groups, "specifics" (reading and spelling were their only difficult school subjects) and "generals" (problems with arithmetic as well as with literacy). When the families of the children in both groups were scanned for a history of reading problems, 40% of the families of the "specifics" showed problems among relatives, while among the "generals," only 25% showed problems. Thus, the specific disorder does seem to run in families more than the general disorder—a plus for the hereditary factor in dyslexia (Crowder and Wagner, 1992). More research is testing this factor.

It is important to remember that not all individuals who have problems with reading are dyslexic. And the diagnosis of dyslexia should only be made by a qualified reading professional. Many slow readers who are not dyslexic, however, can be helped with a variety of reading experiences to improve fluency.

Helping the Problem Reader

There is growing evidence that it might be more appropriate to refer to the amount of time a learner takes to complete a reading task rather than using qualitative labels, such as good, best, or poor reader (Smith, 1990). If we accept the premise that all individuals are capable of learning to read but some need to stretch their learning time, then we can search for adjustments. Slow readers could read shorter passages. In

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this way, they could finish a story and experience the success of sharing it with a parent or friend.

Let's examine some other conditions that will help improve comprehension for those learners sometimes labeled reading disabled. Besides reading more slowly, the person with reading difficulties can be asked to find specific kinds of information in a story, or can be paired with a more capable reader who will help in summarizing the essential points of the reading or in identifying the main ideas of a story.

One of the reasons that these learners read more slowly is that they seem less able to identify the organization of a passage of text (Wong and Wilson, 1984). Since efficient comprehension relies on the reader's ability to see the pattern or the direction that the writer is taking, parents and teachers can help these readers by spending more time on building background for the reading selection, both in the general sense of concept building and in the specific sense of creating a mental scheme for the text organization. Many times, drawing a simple diagram can help these readers greatly.

Direct intervention of parent or teacher or tutor in the comprehension process increases reading comprehension in slower readers (Bos, 1982). These readers often need help with vocabulary and need reminders to summarize as they proceed. They also need to ask themselves questions about what they are reading. The parent can prompt thinking or can provide an insight into the language that may otherwise elude the reader.

One effective strategy for slower readers is to generate visual images of what is being read (Carnine and Kinder, 1985). For the reader to generate images, he or she must first be able to recognize the word. Assuming the reader knows how to recognize words, he or she needs concepts to visualize the flow of action represented on the page. The same kind of concept building techniques that work for average readers also work for slower readers. The slower reader, however, gains more from concrete experiences and images than from abstract discussions. It is not enough for the parent to simply tell the slower reader to use visual images—the parent has to describe the images that occur in his or her own mind as he or she reads a particular passage, thus giving the child a concrete sense of what visual imagery means. Pictures, physical action, demonstrations, practice using words in interviews or in an exchange of views among peers are only a few of the ways that parents, tutors, or teachers can make the key vocabulary take root in the reader's mind.

Helpful Reading Materials

As is the case with most learners, slower readers learn most comfortably with materials that are written on their ability level (Clark *et al.*, 1984). The reading level is of primary concern, but parents can help their reader select helpful materials in other ways. Choose stories or books with (1) a reduced number of difficult words; (2) direct, non-convoluted syntax; (3) short passages that deliver clear messages; (4) subheads that organize the flow of ideas; and (5) helpful illustrations. Older problem readers often find that the newspaper is a good choice for improving reading comprehension (Monda, *et al.*, 1988). Slow readers can succeed with the same frequency as faster readers as long as the parent or tutor maintains a positive attitude and selects materials and approaches that accommodate the child's learning speeds.

Importance of a Positive Attitude

A positive attitude on the part of the child is also crucial to the treatment of difficulties in reading and learning. Tutors who have worked consistently with problem learners are very aware of the role of the self in energizing learning, and the potential damage to the sense of self-worth that comes from labeling. Teachers and parents should appreciate children's thinking as the foundation of their language abilities, and maintain some flexibility in their expectations regarding their children's development of decoding skills such as reading. For children to feel successful, they need to become aware of their unique learning strengths, so that they may apply them effectively while working to strengthen the lagging areas (Webb, 1992). The child needs to feel loved and appreciated as an individual, whatever his or her difficulties in school.

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